

LIFE OF AN AVIATOR

SHORT STORIES

by
Robert Novell

Surfer Dude to Airline Dude



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(Short Stories by Robert Novell – Volume One)



Surfer Dude to Airline Dude

Part One

(From Ocean Blue to Blue Skies)

The movie, “The High and the Mighty,” changed the life of the surfer dude forever. Not exactly, a transition in life that you hear about every day -- surfer dude to airline dude -- but let me explain.

Rob was a transplanted Carolina boy who moved to Flagler Beach, Florida, at the age of eight. Once there, he did not exactly fit in until he discovered surfing the following year. Life changed for the better because he had a real talent for riding the waves and it was not long before he was the best on the waves in all of North Florida. Rob took that success to South Florida and within a year, everyone who knew anything about surfers on the east coast knew Rob. At this point, with a room full of first and second place trophies from surf contest up and down the east coast, you would think that Rob was off to the professional circuit to make his mark but no. Rob was about to make a U-turn and head off in a different direction.

The normal TV menu for Rob was the Sunshine Network, ESPN, and surf videos. However, one night, while channel surfing out of boredom, he stumbled on to a movie about an airplane in trouble as it made a crossing from Hawaii to San Francisco. The movie was, “The High and the Mighty,” and the surfer dude was

glued to his TV until the successful landing of the airplane in San Francisco. Rob was not a fan of John Wayne but in this movie, he found an appreciation for his talent and found a new love: airplanes.

The lives of many have been changed by movies from Hollywood but Rob was not the usual suspect for such a transformation. However, this movie did, and suddenly the surfer dude started exploring the academic requirements to get him in to a position to pursue a career in aviation. He spent less time on the beach and finally began to actually study. He was able to finish high school with a reasonable grade point average, and with high school out of the way, it was time to make his mark in aviation. Or so he thought.

While finishing his last year in high school, Rob had considered going to Embry Riddle in Daytona Beach, Florida. The school was close enough to Flagler Beach that he could commute back and forth and save some money, but the total price of a degree and all of his ratings from Embry Riddle was beyond his reach. So, Rob began to explore his options.

The first option he considered was going to the local airport to learn to fly. However, not much happening there so it was time to exercise option two. Rob went a little farther to the west and found another community airport at Palatka where there was a flight school that could help. Not exactly Embry Riddle but then again the price for a Private Pilot Certificate here was within his reach. It took only two months to complete their program and his instructor called him a natural pilot, encouraging him to continue moving forward. Rob agreed that this was what he wanted but he needed time to contemplate his next move. However, the real issue was money, and how he could pay for his dream. The instructor understood all too well the dilemma.

As luck would have it, his instructor, introduced Rob to a local business owner who owned a Piper Seneca. For non-aviators the Seneca is a small twin-engine plane for six passengers, and although the owner flew very little during the week, he flew almost every weekend. He was a University of Florida graduate, tried to go to all of the games, and even had one of those Gator heads painted on the side of his airplane -- a devoted supporter and fan. So, while Rob was attending the local Community College, he spent a lot of time with the loyal Gator supporters, flying to all of the games, and built enough time to get his Multi Engine Rating followed by his Commercial and Instrument rating, for little or no cost. When he had finished his Associates Degree, he was ready to move on to the next challenge -- a job as a commercial pilot.

Rob's next step in his career would be an adventure in flying and surfing. Rob had continued surfing while in Community College even though he was not able to compete in contests the way he wanted. Most surf contests are on the weekend and so are most of the UF games, but when he did compete, everyone would always gather around him after the last event and want to know why he was not surfing professionally. Rob's answer was simple and straightforward: "Did you ever see the movie "The High and the Mighty?" I love the water but I am destined to ride the endless blue skies as a pilot." To say that there were a few quizzical looks would be an understatement. However, Rob would always explain in detail his transformation and most all of his supporters would applaud his decision, even if they did not agree, with his choosing the blue sky over the blue ocean. "Hey Dude," Rob would say, "You got to do what you got to do – surfs up."

To say that Rob had been lucky in his quest is a fair statement but that which happened next was amazing. Rob had been competing in a contest at the Tables, in Cocoa Beach, and after his last heat where Rob took first place in his division. That was when he was approached by the owner of a local surf shop about a subject that was close to his heart - flying airplanes. The owner asked Rob if it was true that he had in fact obtained his Commercial Pilots license and was looking to fly professionally. "Yes sir," Rob replied, "that's the plan." The owner of the shop replied, "Good, because I may be able to help you. As you know, I have a shop about half way between Flagler and Daytona and I need some help on getting more traffic to the shop, out of the Daytona area during the summer months, and I want to do that with an airplane towing a banner up and down the beach in the morning and in the afternoon. You have an interest?" Rob hesitated for a minute while he tried to decide if he was up for that but decided it was better to say yes quickly and then consider his options. "Absolutely," Rob replied. "OK, come by the shop tomorrow and I will explain the details as well as I would like you to spend some time in the shop being seen by others. You have a quite a reputation in the community and are respected by the kids just starting out."

Turns out the owner had a Citabria, a small two-seat airplane, with a tailwheel instead of a nose wheel, that he was going to configure for banner towing, but it was up to Rob to figure out the rest. The rest meant he had to learn to fly the airplane, figure out the FAA Regulations governing this type of operation, learn how to rig the banner for the pickup, and of course he had to get some instruction on how to make the pickup and how to time the release of the banner when he was dropping it off. Not a small task for the surfer dude considering he had no clue how to do any of this.

Consider now, if you will, that Rob is telling me this story ten years later as we were flying from Anchorage to Tokyo and as I listened, I had to stop him and ask a question. “Rob” I said, “you were how old at this time? Maybe twenty or twenty-one I think?” “That’s about right,” he said. “Why?”

“You were only twenty-two and so far you have managed to have a surf career within fifty or so miles of your home town, you went to college within twenty-five miles of your hometown, and you learned to fly and get all of your ratings within ten miles of your home town. Not many people do this and most people don’t end up flying a Boeing-747 just ten years later. How did that happen?” I asked.

“I am getting there and we still have another six hours to Narita so hold on and I will get to that.”

“OK, I am all ears. Continue on but let’s get the position report out of the way first so that ATC, and the company, know we are safe and sound.”

After the position report, Rob started again and to make a long story short, he did pull a banner for three seasons while he finished up his degree in Aviation Sciences and then luck struck again. Turns out one of his high school buddies was a Sheriff’s Deputy now and one afternoon while surfing he saw his old friend paddling out. They exchanged greetings and Rob’s friend said, “I thought you were off flying airplanes around the world. What brings you home?” “Well, I am flying airplanes and I haven’t made it out of Florida yet, but I am working on that.” As the conversation continued Rob’s friend told him about an operator over in Green Cove Springs, Florida that had a bunch of airplanes and helicopters. Green Cove Springs was only about fifty miles from where Rob lived so he was certainly interested but the conversation stopped abruptly as they started to paddle to catch a wave, which they rode to shore, and then continued their conversation.

Rob’s friend told him that he would talk to the Sheriff of Flagler County and see if he could talk to the Sheriff in Clay County and get a name for him to contact. Rob thanked his friend and then went home thinking that maybe this was the opportunity that he had been waiting for. Still, he doubted they would want to talk to a low time commercial pilot who had gotten most of his time in a single-engine tail wheel airplane pulling banners. Turns out, he was wrong, but the real question he had was why a commercial operator would be in Green Cove Springs. “Oh well, maybe I will get lucky,” he thought.

Part Two

(Three Letter Government Agencies and Airplanes)

Now, a little history about the town of Green Cove Springs, Florida. This was the home of the US Navy's moth ball fleet after World War II and remained so until President Johnson decided that it was appropriate to have this moved to his home state of Texas. As crazy as it may sound, the US Government towed the entire fleet from Green Cove Springs to a port in Texas and once the move had been completed, Green Cove Springs died a slow death. So, how was it that this little town on the St. Johns River had been chosen as a home base by an operator with five-hundred million dollars' worth of fixed wing airplanes and helicopters? I think I will leave that story for another book.

Rob was granted an interview, as a result of the Clay County Sheriff asking for a favor, and during the interview, it became obvious that he was not exactly welcome there. However, they were going to go through the motions to be sure they stayed on the good side of the local Sheriff. After talking with the General Manager, and explaining his background, the GM asked him if he would like to take a tour of the facilities and see the airplanes. You did not have to ask Rob twice and he began to think that maybe he was welcome there after all. As the two of them toured the hangars, they stopped at a small single engine tailwheel airplane and the GM asked Rob if he knew what type of airplane he was looking at? Rob responded, "Yes Sir, that is a Porter but I have only seen pictures until now." The GM advised that they use to have two of these but we lost one in an accident in North Carolina. Luckily, no one was hurt but the airplane was a write off. "Do you think you can fly this?" the GM asked. Rob responded by saying "Yes Sir," and before he knew it he was taxing out with another pilot to prove that he could.

Turns out that the pilot he was flying with was a Southern California boy who had grown up on the beaches of San Diego, riding the waves on his long board, so the first question he was asked was, "Hey man, do you ever do any surfing because you kind of look like a surfer?" "Yes Sir, I do but I am not getting as much time in the water as I would like." "I can relate to that," the other pilot responded and then they spent the rest of their taxi time talking about surf spots, surfboards, and the culture of surfing. When they were holding short of the runway for takeoff, someone decided they had better do a taxi and a takeoff checklist and they both focused again on the business of flying.

To say that the takeoff was different from the Citabria was an understatement. Although Rob was not the pilot flying on the first takeoff, he sat in amazement at

the power of the small turboprop, the lift off in less than two hundred feet, and the climb that seemed to be almost vertical. "I could get use to this," Rob proclaimed and then suddenly Rob heard, "Your airplane." Rob took over the controls, and although the power was a bit overwhelming, he found the airplane easy to fly. They did some airborne maneuvers, came back to the airport and did a couple of touch and go landings, and then they did a full stop landing followed by a short field take off that left Rob completely in awe of this new found machine. "Sure took a lot of rudder on that takeoff", Rob commented, and the other pilot said, "The airplane is really light—it handles a little better when you have it loaded down but I want to show you one more thing. OK, I have the airplane now," as they taxied on to the ramp, "Let me show you something that is really cool."

The ramp was around one hundred by one hundred and fifty feet and they taxied to the side that would give them one hundred feet for the takeoff. He held the brakes, advanced the power to 100%, released the brakes, and before Rob could begin to count to three they were airborne and climbing almost straight up again. Around three hundred feet, or so, they reversed course, configured for landing, descended back towards the ramp and made a full stop landing, on the ramp, in less than fifty feet. Rob stared at the other pilot and then started grinning from ear to ear. "I need to get me one of these," Rob exclaimed. The other pilot responded by saying, "Yea, almost as fun as riding the barrel on a big wave."

The flight was spectacular for Rob and the California surfer dude must have given the GM a positive review because Rob was told to go back to the GM's office shortly after his return and this time there was a little less tension in the air. However, the GM's tone was much more serious than before. "What you just did in the Porter is just a small sample of the type of flying that we do here, but on a more serious note I need to ask you a few questions. Rob, have you ever used drugs, have you ever been arrested, do you have an alcohol problem, and can you pass a polygraph when you answer those questions?" Rob sat silently for a few seconds and then said, "No, no, and no but I would be glad to take a polygraph. But why is it necessary to pass a polygraph to be hired?" The response by the GM was as clear as mud. We do a lot of contract work for different government agencies and they require you to have a polygraph and an extensive background check. We will have to send you to Washington to complete the polygraph but that will be after the background investigation is complete. I am not offering you a job but I am offering you a chance to compete for a job if you make it through the vetting process. "Yes Sir," Rob replied, "but this is just a little bit confusing."

"Everything will make sense to you after we finish up the preliminaries. Normally it takes about six months or so but if you should find something different we will understand. Call us if that should happen but I think you will enjoy the work here."

It is a little different from what you will find elsewhere, and who knows, you might even get to do a little surfing along the way.” Then the GM advised Rob that the Southern California Surfer Dude has already asked for the afternoon off so he can take you to lunch and then bribe you in to showing him your secret surf spots.

Rob made it through the process, flew the Porter, upgraded to Captain on the King Air after six months, and about two years later was flying the Lear-35 as a Captain. Rob spoke briefly about some of the work he did but mostly he talked about all of his international flying. By the time he was 28 he had flown all of Europe, Asia, Africa, and worked Central and South America routinely. Quite an accomplishment for a surfer dude from Flagler Beach, Florida -- and it was just the beginning.

As I indicated earlier, I met Rob when I was flying out of Anchorage on the 747 and we flew together off and on for around six months. Rob took a slot in the 747-400 program, changed his crew base to New York, and shortly after that I left to go be a contract pilot for a beltway company. I have heard from others that Rob is now a 747-400 Captain for Korean Airlines out of Seoul, South Korea, and on his off time, he lives in Maui where I am sure he catches a few waves. Hard to believe how quickly Rob advanced his career, but I can say without hesitation that he was a natural pilot who was right at home in the 747, the Citabria, or the Porter. He was a true **Aviator** with the self-confidence, and experience, that will take him anywhere in life that he wants to go.

OK surfer dude, take care, and my best to you as you surf the endless blue skies and the waves of Maui.